

# ISLAMIC SPIRITUALITY

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Foundations

Edited by  
**Seyyed Hossein Nasr**

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS: ISLAM

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*Edited by*

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

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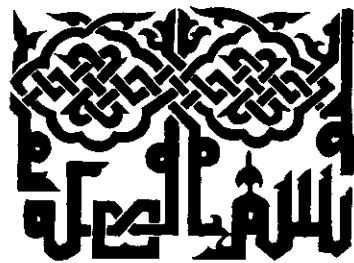
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In the Name of God, Most Merciful, Most Compassionate

قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي

Say, the Spirit is from the Command of my Lord



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## Preface to the Series

**T**HE PRESENT VOLUME is part of a series entitled *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, which seeks to present the spiritual wisdom of the human race in its historical unfolding. Although each of the volumes can be read on its own terms, taken together they provide a comprehensive picture of the spiritual strivings of the human community as a whole—from prehistoric times, through the great religions, to the meeting of traditions at the present.

Drawing upon the highest level of scholarship around the world, the series gathers together and presents in a single collection the richness of the spiritual heritage of the human race. It is designed to reflect the autonomy of each tradition in its historical development, but at the same time to present the entire story of the human spiritual quest. The first five volumes deal with the spiritualities of archaic peoples in Asia, Europe, Africa, Oceania, and North and South America. Most of these have ceased to exist as living traditions, although some endure among tribal peoples throughout the world. However, the archaic level of spirituality survives within the later traditions as a foundational stratum, preserved in ritual and myth. Individual volumes or combinations of volumes are devoted to the major traditions: Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic. Included within the series are the Jain, Sikh, and Zoroastrian traditions. In order to complete the story, the series includes traditions that have not survived but have exercised important influence on living traditions—such as Egyptian, Sumerian, classical Greek and Roman. A volume is devoted to modern esoteric movements and another to modern secular movements.

Having presented the history of the various traditions, the series devotes two volumes to the meeting of spiritualities. The first surveys the meeting of spiritualities from the past to the present, exploring common themes that

*A longer version of this preface may be found in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, the first published volume in the series.*

can provide the basis for a positive encounter, for example, symbols, rituals, techniques. Finally, the series closes with a dictionary of world spirituality.

Each volume is edited by a specialist or a team of specialists who have gathered a number of contributors to write articles in their fields of specialization. As in this volume, the articles are not brief entries but substantial studies of an area of spirituality within a given tradition. An effort has been made to choose editors and contributors who have a cultural and religious grounding within the tradition studied and at the same time possess the scholarly objectivity to present the material to a larger forum of readers. For several years some five hundred scholars around the world have been working on the project.

In the planning of the project, no attempt was made to arrive at a common definition of spirituality that would be accepted by all in precisely the same way. The term "spirituality," or an equivalent, is not found in a number of the traditions. Yet from the outset, there was a consensus among the editors about what was in general intended by the term. It was left to each tradition to clarify its own understanding of this meaning and to the editors to express this in the introduction to their volumes. As a working hypothesis, the following description was used to launch the project:

The series focuses on that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions "the spirit." This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality. The series explores the discovery of this core, the dynamics of its development, and its journey to the ultimate goal. It deals with prayer, spiritual direction, the various maps of the spiritual journey, and the methods of advancement in the spiritual ascent.

By presenting the ancient spiritual wisdom in an academic perspective, the series can fulfill a number of needs. It can provide readers with a spiritual inventory of the richness of their own traditions, informing them at the same time of the richness of other traditions. It can give structure and order, meaning and direction to the vast amount of information with which we are often overwhelmed in the computer age. By drawing the material into the focus of world spirituality, it can provide a perspective for understanding one's place in the larger process. For it may well be that the meeting of spiritual paths—the assimilation not only of one's own spiritual heritage but of that of the human community as a whole—is the distinctive spiritual journey of our time.

EWERT COUSINS

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## Introduction

**T**HE SPIRIT MANIFESTS ITSELF in every religious universe where the echoes of the Divine Word are still audible, but the manner in which the manifestations of the Spirit take place differs from one religion to another. In Islam, the Spirit breathes through all that reveals the One and leads to the One, for Islam's ultimate purpose is to reveal the Unity of the Divine Principle and to integrate the world of multiplicity in the light of that Unity. Spirituality in Islam is inseparable from the awareness of the One, of Allah, and a life lived according to His Will. The principle of Unity (*al-tawhīd*) lies at the heart of the Islamic message and determines Islamic spirituality in all its multifarious dimensions and forms. Spirituality is *tawhīd* and the degree of spiritual attainment achieved by any human being is none other than the degree of his or her realization of *tawhīd*. For the Word manifested Itself in what came to be the Islamic universe in order to declare the glory of the One and to lead human beings to the realization of the One.

The central theophany of Islam, the Quran, is the source *par excellence* of all Islamic spirituality. It is the Word manifested in human language. Through it, knowledge of the One and the paths leading to Him were made accessible in that part of the cosmos which was destined to become the abode of Islam. Likewise, the soul and inner Substance of the Prophet are the complementary source of Islamic spirituality—hidden outwardly but living as presence and as transforming grace within the hearts of those who tread the path of realization. Moreover, it can be said that both the created order and man himself are also marked by the imprint of Divine Unity and must be taken into consideration in any study of Islamic spirituality. According to the Quran, God has manifested His signs upon the “horizons” or the macrocosmic world and also within the soul of man, for He has “breathed into man” His own Spirit (*nafakhtu fīhi min rūḥī* (XXXVIII, 72)).<sup>1</sup> To be fully human is to stand on the vertical axis of existence and to seek *tawhīd*, to see the reflection of the One in all that makes up the manifold order from the angelic to the mineral.

Related to Islamic spirituality are all the doctrines that speak of the One, all the artistic forms that reflect the principle of Unity, and all human actions that issue from the inner man as a theomorphic being. To live by the Will of God Who is One and to obey His Laws is the alpha of the spiritual life. Its omega is to surrender one's will completely to Him and to sacrifice one's existence before the One Who alone can be said ultimately to be. Between the two stand various levels of correct and ever more interiorized action, and above the plane of action stand the love of God and finally knowledge of Him, the knowledge that is summarized in the testimony (*Shahādah*) of Islam *Lā ilāha illa' Llāh* (There is no divinity but God, but Allah, the One). All that one needs to know and can know is already contained in this testimony. To accept it along with the second *Shahādah*, *Muḥammad<sup>un</sup> rasūl Allāh* (Muḥammad is God's Messenger) is to become a Muslim. To realize its full meaning is to reach the highest degree of spirituality, to act perfectly according to His Will, to love only the Beloved, and to know all that can be known. It is to gain sanctity and attain the crown of spiritual poverty. It is to become a friend of God, *walī Allāh*, the term that Muslims use for saint.

In a profound sense, Islamic spirituality is nothing other than the realization of *tawḥīd*. Its study is nothing other than tracing the impact in depth of *tawḥīd* upon the life, actions, art, and thought of that segment of the human race which makes up the Islamic people or *ummah*. One might, however, ask how this definition differs from that of Islam as a whole. The answer lies in the dimension of depth or inwardness which distinguishes Islamic spirituality from the Islamic religion as a whole. Islam embraces all of human life, both the outward and the inward. Any comprehensive work on Islam would have to consider both aspects, the socio-political and economic dimension as well as the inner dimension. But a work devoted to Islamic spirituality must concern itself primarily with what leads to inwardness and the world of the Spirit. It must deal with the outward elements of the religion to the extent that they serve as vehicles for the life of the Spirit without in any way losing sight of the great significance of the outward dimension, which is indispensable for the inner life.

### The Term "Spirituality" in Islamic Languages

Since the term "spirituality" as used in the English language has obviously strong Christian connotations, some may raise the question: What does spirituality mean in the context of the Islamic tradition itself? The answer to such a question could best be found by turning to the term "spirituality" in the major Islamic languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. In these

and most other languages in which the ethos of Islam and its spirituality have found expression, the terms used for "spirituality" are *rūḥāniyyah* (Arabic), *ma'nawīyyat* (Persian), or their derivatives. An analysis of these terms alone is sufficient to provide a key for understanding the meaning of spirituality in its Islamic context. Both terms are of Arabic origin, drawn from the language of the Quran and the Islamic Revelation. The first is derived from the word *rūḥ*, meaning spirit, concerning which the Quran instructs the Prophet<sup>2</sup> to say, when he was asked about the nature of spirit, "The Spirit is from the command of my Lord" (XVII, 85). The second derives from the word *ma'nā*, literally "meaning," which connotes inwardness, "real" as opposed to "apparent," and also "spirit" as this term is understood traditionally—that is, pertaining to a higher level of reality than both the material and the psychic and being directly related to the Divine Reality Itself.

In summary, these terms refer to that which is related to the world of the Spirit, is in Divine Proximity, possesses inwardness and interiority, and is identified with the real—and therefore also, from the Islamic point of view—permanent, and abiding rather than the transient and passing. Taken together, these meanings reveal aspects of Islamic spirituality as it is understood by traditional Islam and from the Islamic point of view, which is the perspective of this work.

There is also another dimension to the meaning of "spirituality," as used in Islamic languages. When this term is employed, there is always evoked a sense of the presence of the *barakah*, or that grace which flows in the vein of the universe and within the life of man to the extent that he dedicates himself to God. There is, in addition, the sense of moral perfection and beauty of the soul as far as human beings are concerned. There is also a "presence" which brings about recollection of God and the paradisaal world when ideas, sounds, and words and, in general, objects and works of art are involved. In all these cases, the term "spirituality" evokes in the Muslim mind a proximity to God and the world of the Spirit.

The term always possesses a positive connotation, never being either anti-intellectual or antinomian. If there is anything that can be opposed to it, in the Islamic context, it is that interpretation of Islam which would limit itself only to the outward forms without consideration of the inner reality and the spirit that resides within these forms. Otherwise, the spiritual is never opposed to the formal. Rather, it always makes use of the formal, which it interiorizes. Also, the spiritual cannot be simply equated with the esoteric as opposed to the exoteric. Although the spiritual is more closely related to the esoteric dimension (*al-bāṭin*) of Islam than to any other aspect of the religion, it is also very much concerned with the exoteric acts and

the Divine Law as well as theology, philosophy, the arts, and the sciences created by Islam and its civilization. But its concern with the exoteric is always with the aim of making possible the journey from the outward to the abode of inwardness.

The essence of Islamic spirituality, then, is the realization of Unity, as expressed in the Quran, on the basis of the prophetic model and with the aid of the Prophet. The goal of this spirituality is to become embellished by the Divine Qualities through attainment of those virtues which were possessed in their perfection by the Prophet and with the aid of methods and the grace which issue from him and the Quranic Revelation. The spiritual life is based at once upon the reverential fear of God and obedience to His Will, love of God to which the Quran refers in the verse, "He loves them and they love Him" (V, 54), and knowledge of God which is the ultimate goal of creation. Islamic spirituality is a love always colored and conditioned by knowledge and based on an obedience already practiced and contained in living according to the Divine Law, which embodies God's concrete will for Muslims.

This spirituality has rejuvenated Islamic society over the ages and produced countless men and women of saintly nature who have fulfilled the goal of human existence and brought joy to other human beings. It has caused the flowering of some of the world's greatest art, ranging from gardening to music, and made possible the appearance of some of the most outstanding philosophers and scientists whom the world has known. It has also carried out a discourse with other religions when circumstances have demanded. It has always remained at the heart of Islam and is the key for a deeper understanding of Islam in its many aspects.

### Design of the Islamic Volumes

There are two volumes devoted to Islamic spirituality in the series *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*. Their purpose, in contrast to studies on the Islamic religion itself, is to bring out the spiritual aspect of Islam, as described above. Much has been written in European languages on nearly every aspect of Islam, mostly from an outsider's point of view and some from either within the Islamic tradition or sympathetic to it. Yet Islamic spirituality has rarely been treated as a distinct category in either type of work, so that the present volumes may, in a sense, be considered as the first major collection of essays in English on this crucial subject. This lack of precedent has posed many problems and challenges not only in the conception of the work but also in its execution.

This first volume is designed to present the foundations of Islamic

spirituality, treating in the first section its roots in the Quran, the Prophet, his life and sayings, the Islamic rites of prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, and *jihād*. The second section presents the basic traditions of Islam: Sunnism, Twelve-Imam Shī'ism, and Ismā'ilism, along with a study of female spirituality in Islam. The third section is devoted to Sufism: its nature, origin, early development, and spiritual practices, as well as the Sufi science of the soul. The fourth section deals with knowledge of reality: the Islamic doctrines of God, angels, the cosmos and natural order, man, and eschatology.

The second volume will present Islamic spirituality in its manifestations in history and culture as it has developed throughout a vast area of the globe in the form of Sufi orders, in the arts and literature, from architecture to poetry, and in philosophy and the sciences. Throughout the two volumes the goal will be to show how the essence and manifestations of Islamic spirituality are concerned with the principle of Divine Unity.

As treated in the first part of this volume, the roots and definitive sources of Islamic spirituality are, of course, the Word of God as revealed in the Quran and the nature and inner Substance of the Prophet, who received the Word and made it known to mankind. The significance of these principal sources can be understood only if one turns to the inner aspect of the Quranic and Prophetic realities and does not limit oneself to the external meaning of the words of the Quran or merely the historical events in the life of the Prophet. Of great importance, therefore, have been the esoteric commentaries on the Quran in the spiritual life of the Islamic community and of the individual Muslim. Likewise, in addition to the spiritual significance of the Prophet, one must consider his sayings and traditions, *Ḥadīth* and *Sunnah*, which have crystallized this spirituality in specific words, norms, and deeds that have been emulated over the centuries by all Muslims, especially those in quest of the spiritual life.

The roots of Islamic spirituality are also found in the Islamic rites that constitute the pillars of the faith: the rites of daily prayers, fasting, and pilgrimage as well as the paying of religious tax, and that exertion upon the path of God, or *jihād*, which is usually mistranslated as "holy war." The description of these rites in their external forms and the legal conditions pertaining to them belong to general works on Islam and need not be treated in detail in a study devoted to spirituality. But because these rites are the means by which man approaches God, they are of the utmost importance in Islamic spirituality. They are like the descent of the inward and the spiritual toward the outward and material worlds in order to enable man to return to the inward and reach the world of the Spirit. That is why so many classical works on Islamic spirituality have major sections devoted to



what they call secrets of worship, *asrār al-‘ibādāt*, that is, the inner meaning of the Islamic rites.

The second part of this volume deals with the major segments of the Islamic community: Sunnism and Shī‘ism. This division does not destroy the unity of Islam, since both issue from the same source. They are united in their acceptance of Divine Unity, prophecy, and eschatology, as well as reverence for the text of the Quran. But they emphasize different aspects of Islamic spirituality and have their own doctrinal and practical formulation concerning the theological, philosophical, and social teachings of Islam. Moreover, each possesses a profound piety which, although Islamic, possesses what can be called its own particular spiritual perfume. In order to bring out the full flavor of the spiritual life in each of these schools, this volume has considered them from the point of view of those who live and practice their distinctive piety. At the same time, it has provided a scholarly understanding of the theological and historical differences that have distinguished them from each other over the ages, as well as a description of the different ways in which each has emphasized an aspect of Islamic piety and has reflected a particular dimension of the inner nature of the Prophet himself. Although separate articles are devoted to Sunnism and Shī‘ism, most of the volume, including the articles on Sufism and on doctrine, has been written predominately from the Sunni point of view, so that Sunni spirituality is not confined merely to the article specifically on Sunnism.

Included in this part is an article on female spirituality. In the context of today’s world, it is of the utmost importance to make it clear that it is possible for a woman to follow the spiritual life in Islam. It is also important to bring to light the characteristics of such a life and to observe how Islamic female spirituality has manifested itself over the ages. This subject is especially timely in view of the interest in female spirituality in the West along with considerable misunderstanding about the teaching of Islam concerning women. To do full justice to this subject, it must be treated by a Muslim woman who has herself lived the spiritual life and who can at the same time express something of its features to a Western audience in English. There exists in Islam a type of spirituality with a distinct feminine color. This needs to be made known in a language that does justice to it by beginning from within and remaining faithful to its nature and norm.

Part 3 deals with Sufism, the most accessible source of the inner dimension of Islam. Some aspects of this inner dimension, or *al-bāṭin*, also manifest themselves in both Twelve-Imam and Isma‘īlī Shī‘ism. Sufism, which is found predominantly in Sunnism, also exists, however, within Shī‘ism, independently of the partly esoteric nature of Shī‘ism as a whole. In order to grasp the essence of Islamic spirituality, one must know Sufism in its

nature, for this nature itself derives from the substance of the Prophet and the inner teachings of the Quran. One must see Sufism as rooted in the Islamic Revelation in order to appreciate its flowering into a vast tree during later centuries. It is also essential to delve into the Sufi disciplines of meditation, contemplation, and invocation. These practices are, in a sense, none other than the Islamic rites in their inner dimension. But they have developed to such an extent as distinct practices that they need to be considered on their own.

Sufism also possesses a science for the cure of the ailments of the soul, for untying the knots that entangle the soul and prevent it from becoming wed to the Spirit. This science, which is a spiritual alchemy, is a veritable "psychotherapy," far superior to modern psychotherapy, for the latter claims to cure the soul without possessing any power belonging to a world standing above that of the soul. Therefore, it often drags the soul to lower psychic regions. The Sufi master, on the contrary, helps to cure the soul of the disciple by means of the Spirit, which stands above the soul and which alone is able to pacify and at the same time excite the soul, to illuminate it and bring about the ecstasy that is the result of spiritual union.

The final section of this volume deals with doctrinal knowledge. Since in Islam the intellect (*al-'aql*) and the Spirit (*al-ruh*) are closely related, the acquiring of knowledge itself has always been seen as a religious activity. In fact, supreme knowledge is identified with the highest spiritual realization, and Islamic spirituality as a whole possesses a sapiential and gnostic character. That is why the Islamic doctrines on the nature of Reality or the knowledge of Reality constitute a basic element of Islamic spirituality. At the apex of this knowledge stands, of course, knowledge of God. The *raison d'être* of Islamic revelation is to make known the doctrine of the Divine Nature in all its depth and amplitude, to reveal the knowledge of God as both absolute and infinite, transcendent and immanent, beyond all description yet possessing Names and Qualities by which man is asked to call upon Him and to pray to Him. The knowledge of God is the goal of all Islamic injunctions and the purpose of creation, according to the famous *ḥadīth*, "I was a hidden treasure; I wanted to be known; therefore I created the world so that I would be known." This knowledge is, therefore, also the goal of the spiritual life and both the basis and the fruit of Islamic spirituality.

Knowledge of reality in the metaphysical sense comprises also that of the angels, who are often mentioned in the Quran. The angelic orders in their dazzling depth and breadth, as described in traditional sources, are related to the ritual aspect of religion and to daily piety as well as to eschatology, cosmology, and psychology understood in its traditional sense. From its expression in daily piety to its manifestation in philosophy, Islamic spirituality

is intertwined with the function and presence of angels. Angelology is a key to the understanding of the Islamic universe.

No sacred scripture emphasizes more than the Quran the participation of the cosmos in God's Revelation. Through the Quranic Revelation, the cosmos is in a sense re-sacralized and returned to its primordial spiritual status. Meditation on the phenomena of nature is considered a religious duty in the Quran. On the basis of its injunctions and the very spirit of Islam, throughout the centuries Muslims have continued to draw spiritual sustenance from virgin nature. It is not possible to understand Islamic spirituality fully without comprehending the spiritual significance of nature in both the Quran and subsequent schools of Islamic thought. The sun and the moon are not only astronomical bodies but also cosmic realities that participate in the Islamic universe and which, in the Quran, God Himself takes as witnesses.

Islam contains a doctrine of man that complements its doctrine of God in His absoluteness and oneness. It presents a message based on God as He is in Himself—on His absoluteness and infinitude—and not on a particular manifestation. In his role as a theomorphic being, man is at once “nothing” before the Divine Majesty and the vice-gerent of God who by his theomorphic nature reflects God's Names and Qualities in this world. All human beings have the possibility of realizing the fullness of human nature, or *insān*, and of becoming the perfect or universal man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), although in actuality such a possibility is realized only by the prophets and great saints. The “universal man,” the perfect example of which was the Prophet, serves as the model for the spiritual life.

The last chapters of the Quran emphasize above all else the eschatological realities in a powerful language that has left its permanent imprint on the minds and hearts of all Muslims. The everyday life of traditional Muslims is intertwined with the reality of death. In accordance with the texts of the Quran, masters of Islamic spirituality over the ages have emphasized the importance of remembering death at all times and of realizing the ephemeral nature of life in this world. There is a vast corpus of literature in various Islamic languages on eschatology: on both the end of the world and the posthumous states that the individual soul must traverse after death. This type of writing ranges from popular works of pious literature to philosophical and gnostic texts of the greatest intellectual and spiritual significance.

The above themes constitute the foundations of Islamic spirituality, to which this volume is devoted. These foundations have been and remain an ever-present reality, like the Ka'bah itself, for all generations of Muslims from East to West. From these foundations have issued the manifestations of Islamic spirituality in diverse regions throughout history, which will be the subject of the next volume.

### Traditional Islamic Scholarship

Before we describe the individual articles in this volume, it is wise to examine the nature of scholarship within the Islamic tradition. It is essential to remember that Islamic spirituality, as well as the Islamic scholarly tradition, is still very much alive. We are not dealing with an archaic civilization that has already passed into the pages of history and is resuscitated only through Western scholarly efforts. To bring out the significance of this spirituality, it is necessary to remain faithful to its norms and also its own traditional scholarship. However, it is imperative to remember that this tradition has not undergone the same changes related to the spread of humanism, rationalism, empiricism, historicism, and positivism which, since the Renaissance, have deeply affected Western scholarship in all domains including religion itself. The vast majority of Muslims simply do not have the same attitude toward their Sacred Scripture or the *Hadīth* as those in the West who follow the methods of what has become known as higher criticism. Nor can the Muslims be accused of shortcomings if they have not followed the prevalent, modern Western world view but have remained faithful to their own tradition. Islamic spirituality is a living reality and must be presented as such rather than as a cadaver dissected according to a world view that is alien to it. This is the necessary condition for a study that seeks to be authentic. And yet Islamic spirituality must be presented to the Western world in a language that is comprehensible to that world.

These are the considerations that have determined the choice of the contributors to the Islamic volumes. The editor sought to invite scholars and spiritual authorities who could express various facets of Islamic spirituality in a manner that would be Islamically authentic and at the same time intelligible to a Western audience. It was necessary to invite scholars who were immersed in traditional Islamic scholarship with its emphasis on the oral as well as the written tradition, along with scholars well versed in Western methodologies yet sympathetic to Islamic spirituality. It was essential to include writings of men and women who have themselves lived and experienced this spirituality as well as those well acquainted with the written primary and secondary sources and with Western as well as Islamic methods of scholarship.

In certain essays, the reader may encounter a manner of looking upon traditional sources, the question of authority, authenticity, and transmission different from what current Western scholarship upholds. This is due not to a lack of scholarship but to the presence of another scholarly tradition—and, most of all, the presence of a living spiritual tradition whose authenticity and legitimacy cannot be simply determined by nineteenth-century European methods of historical criticism.

What are the characteristics of traditional Islamic scholarship? Islam developed its own indigenous modes of scholarship at the same time that it assimilated certain aspects of the linguistic, literary, scientific, and philosophical traditions of the Greco-Alexandrian and Persian worlds as well as those of other cultures it encountered throughout its history. In addition, through the centuries Islam cultivated and refined spiritual techniques based on Prophetic practice and elaborated by later masters. It amassed a body of spiritual wisdom that was often expressed in complex literary forms with an elaborate symbolic language and supported by architectonic philosophical structures. There is, in fact, not one form of traditional scholarship in Islam but many, which throughout its history have been integrated into various patterns and which have developed their own methodologies while maintaining a spiritual and intellectual cohesion. These have every right to be acknowledged as authentic modes of scholarship and means of attainment of knowledge. It is true that for a variety of reasons Islam has not assimilated the techniques and attitudes of Western historical criticism to the same extent as Jewish and Christian scholarship. The Islamic volumes in this series reflect this reality and the existing state of Islamic scholarship: rooted in its own spiritual experience with its accumulated spiritual wisdom, reflected upon through its classical scholarly traditions, and employing Western methods of scholarship to the degree that these methods do not distort the authenticity of the Islamic tradition.

The reader must accept the right of other religious universes to live and function according to their own ethos and principles in order to gain some authentic insights into those universes rather than viewing them simply through the perspective of current Western modes of thinking. The reader, then, should not be surprised if articles on the Quran do not raise the kinds of questions that Western scholars since the nineteenth century have raised about the Bible. Nor should the reader expect to find references to all quotations from the *Hadith* or sayings of spiritual teachers. The articles in this and the subsequent volume reflect a predominantly oral tradition, where exact references to written sources have not been established in certain instances, nor are they expected, as would be the case in a more textually grounded ethos.

### The Authors and Their Contributions

In the light of these considerations, the editor invited a diverse group of scholars and spiritual authorities to contribute to these volumes. Some of the authors are well-known scholars, and some younger ones of promise. Some are spiritual authorities, and others Western—and in one case Japanese—

scholars who have penetrated deeply into Islamic spirituality and through both empathy and knowledge are in a position to speak about it in an authentic manner. Moreover, the Muslim scholars are drawn from the length and breadth of the Islamic world and are known for both their knowledge and their deep attachment to the Islamic tradition. It is hoped that in this fashion the richness of Islamic spirituality has been presented in such a way as to preserve its authentic nature and reflect the diversity of schools and approaches while expressing the message in a language that is comprehensible to the Western reader.

Several of the essays written by Muslim scholars have been edited by us in order to conform to the norms of the series. In all such cases we have sought to preserve the tenor of the original work while adjusting it to the guidelines established for all the volumes of the series. Our editing has, however, avoided any attempt to bring about uniformity. Since each essay is written by a scholar immersed in the subject and reflects a particular spiritual evaluation of the material, we have allowed the individual characteristics of each essay to stand even at the expense of a lack of uniformity of presentation. Likewise, the translations of the Quran have not been made uniform and are either by the author of the article or from the Arberry or Pickthall translations. This lack of uniformity is amply compensated for by the unity which dominates the work and which results from the inner unity of Islamic spirituality itself.

Part 1 of the present volume, "The Roots of Islamic Tradition and Spirituality," begins with several essays on the Quran. The first essay, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, discusses the way the Quran was revealed and assembled, its names and their significance, its language and some of its themes. It explores the important role the Quran plays in the lives of Muslims and the way it serves as the source of all Islamic teachings. The article focuses on the inner meaning of the Sacred Text and the way in which the spiritual teachings of Islam are present in the inner dimension of the Quran. Allahbakhsh K. Brohi also deals with the significance of the Quran in the life of Islam but treats the subject more as a Muslim meditating on its verses and chapters. His essay is an existential witness to the spiritual significance of the Book and a vivid example of how a pious Muslim draws sustenance from it and is nourished by its message. Abdurrahman Habil turns to a more scholarly and historical treatment of the esoteric commentaries on the Quran, showing their central importance for all aspects of spiritual life within the Islamic world. Beginning with the second/eighth-century commentary of Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, he deals with various periods in the history of Quranic interpretation, including both Sufi and Shī'ite commentaries.

This part includes an exceptional essay by Frithjof Schuon on the spiritual significance of the Substance of the Prophet. Speaking as a spiritual authority, Schuon deals with a subject that has not been treated in such an explicit manner even in traditional Islamic sources. He brings out the significance of that invisible yet very real presence of the inner being of the Prophet in all Islamic spirituality. Ja'far Qasimi then turns to the life, or *Sīrah*, of the Prophet. He gives a detailed account of the life of the founder of Islam based completely on traditional sources, as these sources have been understood and accepted by Muslims all over the world. His goal is not historical criticism in the Western sense of the term, but his work is based on solid traditional scholarship. Rather, he seeks to make known the life of the Prophet as it affects the religious and spiritual life of Muslims. In a complementary chapter, S. H. Nasr discusses the significance of the *Ḥadīth* literature, that is, the body of the sayings of the Prophet as sifted and studied by the traditional scholars who over a millennium ago assembled the canonical collections that were accepted by the Sunnis and were also assembled separately by authoritative Shī'ite sources. Although he devotes some space to a response to Western criticism of the authenticity of the *Ḥadīth*, the author seeks to bring out the role of the *Ḥadīth* in the spiritual life. In a similar vein, he discusses the actions of the Prophet (*Sunnah*) in the light of their importance to spiritual practice.

Syed Ali Ashraf turns to the study of the meaning of the Islamic rites: the canonical prayers, fasting, pilgrimage, the religious tax, and *jihād*, or holy effort or exertion. He demonstrates how the rites performed by all Muslims also possess an inward meaning, which, however, is discovered only by those who follow the path of inwardness. A. K. Brohi concludes this part by delving more deeply into the rite of prayer. Basing himself mostly on the opening chapter of the Quran, the *Sūrat al-fātiḥah*, Brohi shows how and why the Quran commands men and women to pray and how prayer transforms and interiorizes them.

Part 2, "Aspects of the Islamic Tradition," begins with the article of Abdur-Rahman Ibrahim Doi on Sunnism. The author delineates the principles of Sunni belief and the differences between Sunnism and Shī'ism, provides a brief history of the various caliphates throughout Islamic history, and treats practices and virtues emphasized in Sunnism. In his discussion of Twelve-Imam Shī'ism, Syed Husain M. Jafri points to the Shī'ite principles of belief and the differences between Shī'ism and Sunnism. He discusses extensively the role of the Imam and the significance of the lives of some of the Imams in the history of Shī'ism and treats specific features of Shī'ite piety and practices. Azim Nanji deals with the early development of Ismā'īlism, the

foundation of the Fāṭimid dynasty, the later proliferation of Ismāʿīlism into the Nizārīs and Mustaʿlīs, the growth of the Yemeni form of Ismāʿīlism, and finally the spread of Ismāʿīlism in India. He also deals with some of the major figures of Ismāʿīlī thought and the central themes with which they were concerned.

Finally, in this section Saadia Khawar Khan Chishti, a Pakistani woman who is both a scholar and a follower of the Islamic spiritual path, deals with female spirituality in Islam. She treats these themes both historically, as embodied in the wives of the Prophet and the early women saints, and as it can be practiced today. She deals with the spiritual life as it concerns women and the spiritual significance of the life of women as ordered by the *Sharīʿah* or Divine Law. Although her treatment of feminine spirituality is very different from the discussion of women's issues in the West today, it stands in the mainstream of traditional Islamic life. The author herself is at the center of the religious life of her country and very active in the question of the role of women in the present-day life of Pakistan.

Part 3, "Sufism," begins with an essay on the nature and origin of Sufism written from within the Sufi tradition by Abu Bakr Siraj Ed-Din. Basing himself entirely on the Quran, the author demonstrates the completely Islamic origin of Sufism and shows why Sufism could not but be the response of the Muslim soul at its deepest level to the call of the Quran. Victor Danner likewise emphasizes the Islamic origin of Sufism in his essay on its early development. He demonstrates the necessity of the rise of the Sufi circles and orders and provides a history of early Sufism seen from within. He also treats the tension between Sufism and the exoteric dimension of the religion, which necessitated the synthesis of al-Ghazzālī in the fifth/eleventh century. Jean-Louis Michon turns to the specific question of spiritual practices, again emphasizing the origin of these practices in the Quran and the *Sunnah*. He analyzes the major Sufi practices, such as the chanting of poems in praise of the Prophet, litanies, and invocations. Mohammad Ajmal concludes this section with a study of the Sufi science of the soul. Basing himself chiefly on the fourteenth/twentieth-century Indian Sufi authority Mawlana Thanvi, the author analyzes the Sufi science of the soul and compares it with schools of Western psychotherapy.

Part 4, "Knowledge of Reality," concludes the volume by treating knowledge of divine, cosmic, and human reality. In his essay on God, S. H. Nasr points to the centrality of the doctrine of God as the One in all aspects of Islam and the knowledge of the One as the supreme goal of Islamic spirituality. The author also elaborates the Quranic doctrine of the transcendence and immanence of God and of the Divine Names. Sachiko Murata turns to



the Islamic doctrine of angels, drawing from the Quran and *Hadith* as well as later traditional sources. She discusses the meaning of angels, their hierarchy, and their role in religious life and in the life of the cosmos. She treats also the function of the angels as instruments of illumination and their significance in the spiritual life, as attested by Gabriel's role in guiding the Prophet in his Nocturnal Ascension to the Throne of God. In his essay on the cosmos and the natural order, S. H. Nasr highlights the cosmic dimension of the Quranic Revelation. Nature is a cosmic book revealing the "signs" of God, and the Quran emphasizes the spiritual relation that exists between man and nature. The author explores Islamic cosmology, its relation to the Quran, and its significance for the spiritual life. In his essay on the Islamic doctrine of man, Charles le Gai Eaton explains the importance of the rapport between man and the cosmos. As the "caliph of God" (*khalīfat Allāh*) on earth, man is the custodian of the natural environment and the bridge between heaven and earth. Eaton discusses the responsibilities of man toward God, himself, society, and the cosmic order. Finally, William C. Chittick turns to the complex question of eschatology, beginning with the references to eschatology in the Quran and *Hadith*. He deals with traditional accounts of death and the afterlife, the metaphysical discussion of eschatology, the lesser and the greater resurrection, and the significance of eschatology for the spiritual life.

The diversity of themes and approaches in this volume reflects the reality of its subject matter as well as the world to which it is addressed. By seeking to treat the major aspects of Islamic spirituality with authenticity and sympathy in a language comprehensible to a Western audience, we hope not only to make Islamic spirituality better known but also to serve the cause of spirituality itself in the deepest sense possible. To know an authentic spirituality in depth is to know spirituality as such, especially if the spirituality in question is of the universality, diversity, power, and living presence of that of Islam.

In conclusion, we wish to thank all the contributors from both the Orient and the Occident, who have made this and the subsequent volume possible despite great distances and difficulties of communication. We also wish to thank especially Katherine O'Brien, who has assisted us with both the editing and the selection of illustrations. Our thanks are also due to Sarolyn Joseph, who has helped in typing the manuscript, and to S. V. R. Nasr, who has assisted in the preparation of the glossary and bibliography. Finally, we express our gratitude to Ewert Cousins for his continuous help, to William Chittick for his assistance in correcting the proofs and making many valuable suggestions, and to Carrie Rodomar for her help in the latter

stage of the editing process. May the collaboration of all involved in this work make possible a better understanding of Islamic spirituality in a world so much in need of the message of the Spirit that bloweth where it listeth.

*Wa mā tawfiqī illā bi'LLāh*  
Our success comes only through God.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

#### Notes

1. In accordance with the Islamic perspective and the wish of the authors of this work, the word "man" in English is used as corresponding to the Arabic *insān*, or human, and possesses no "sexist" connotations.

2. In traditional Islamic sources, the name of the Prophet is always followed by the formula *ṣalla 'Llāh 'alayhī wa sallam*—that is, "blessings and peace be upon him." The names of the other prophets—and in Shi'ism also the Imams—are followed by *'alayhī-ṣ-salām*, that is, "peace be upon him." Since this work is written in English for a predominantly non-Muslim audience, the traditional formulas are not included. Moreover, throughout the two Islamic volumes in this series, whenever the term "Prophet" is used with a capital *P*, it refers to the Prophet of Islam. As for the Quran, in Arabic it is usually called the Noble or Glorious Quran (*al-Karīm*, *al-Majīd*), the term "Holy Quran" being a modern Muslim usage derived from the term "Holy Bible." In the case of the sacred book of Islam also, for the same reasons as above, only the term "Quran" will be used.

## List of Transliterations

### *Arabic characters*

ك	k
ل	l
م	m
ن	n
ه	h
و	w
ي	y
ة	ah; at (construct state)
ال	(article) al- and 'l- even before the anteropalatals)
ر	r
ز	z
س	s
ش	sh
ص	s
ض	ḍ
ط	ṭ
ظ	ẓ
ع	‘
غ	gh
ف	f
ق	q

### *long vowels*

ا	ā
و	ū
ي	ī

### *short vowels*

ا	a
و	u
ي	i

### *diphthongs*

او	aw
اي	ay
يى	iiy (final form ī)
وو	uww (final form ū)

### *Persian letters added to the Arabic alphabet*

پ	p
چ	ch
ژ	zh
گ	g

===== Part One =====

THE ROOTS OF  
THE ISLAMIC TRADITION  
AND SPIRITUALITY



# The Quran as the Foundation of Islamic Spirituality

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

IF THE SOUL OF THE PROPHET is the fountainhead of Islamic spirituality, the Quran is like that lightning which having struck the human receptacle caused this fountainhead to gush forth or like the water descending from heaven which made streams to flow from this fountainhead. The Quran is the origin and source of all that is Islamic, including, of course, spirituality and the Muḥammadan grace (*al-barakat al-muḥammadiyyah*); and the whole of the spiritual path that emanates from the very Substance of the Prophet owes its existence to the descent of the Word of God upon the virgin soul of His Messenger. If there had not been a Night of Power (*laylat al-qadr*), when the Quran descended from the Divine Empyrean to the human plane, there would have been no Night of Ascension (*laylat al-mi'rāj*), when the Prophet ascended from the earth to the Divine Throne, an ascension that is the model of all spiritual realization in Islam.

## The Nature of the Quran

The Quran is the verbatim revelation of the Word of God, revealed in Arabic through the archangel Gabriel to the Prophet during the twenty-three-year period of his prophetic mission. The first verses were revealed when the Prophet was meditating in the cave of Ḥirā' on the Mountain of Light (*jabal al-nūr*) near Mecca, and the last shortly before his death. The verses were memorized by many of the companions and gradually set to writing by such companions as 'Alī and Zayd. Finally, during the time of 'Uthmān, the third caliph, the definitive text based on these early copies and the confirmation of those who had heard the verses from the mouth

of the Prophet was copied and sent to the four corners of the Islamic world. The text of the Quran is thus not based on long periods of compilation and interpretation by human agents.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the Quran is the actual Word of God as revealed to His Messenger and is like Christ for Christians, who is himself the Word of God brought into the world through the Virgin Mary. She, therefore, plays a role analogous to that of the soul of the Prophet; both are pure, immaculate, and virginal before the Divine Word.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, not only the meaning of the Quran but also its form—and, in fact, all that relates to it—is of a sacred character. The written words as calligraphy, the sounds of the recited text, the very physical presence of the Book, as well as, of course, the message contained therein, are sacred and spiritually important.

To understand the spiritual significance of the Quran, it is essential to remember that the Quran was a sonoral revelation. The first words of the Sacred Text revealed by Gabriel surrounded the Prophet like an ocean of sound as the archangel himself filled the whole of the sky. The sound of the Quran penetrates the Muslim's body and soul even before it appeals to his mind. The sacred quality of the psalmody of the Quran can cause spiritual rapture even in a person who knows no Arabic. In a mysterious way, this sacred quality is transmitted across the barrier of human language and is felt by those hundreds of millions of non-Arab Muslims, whether they be Persian, Turkish, African, Indian, or Malay, whose hearts palpitate in the love of God and whose eyes are moistened by the tears of joy upon simply hearing the Quran chanted. It can be said that the Muslim lives in a space defined by the sound of the Quran and that the sonoral character of the Quranic revelation remains central to the spiritual life of Islam.<sup>3</sup>

It must, furthermore, be remembered that the soul of the Muslim is composed of Quranic formulas and quotations which the faithful recite in the language of the Quran whatever might be their mother tongue. The Muslim begins every action with *bismi'llāh al-Rahmān al-Rahīm* ("in the Name of God Most Merciful, Most Compassionate"), ends every action with *al-hamd li'llāh* ("praise be to God"), resigns himself to what has passed by placing it in God's hand with the statement *māshā' Allāh* ("what God has willed") and, in planning all future action, realizes that the future is determined by God's Will by asserting *inshā' Allāh* ("if God wills"). The attitudes embedded in these and many other Quranic formulas determine the framework of the spiritual life for the Muslim. Through them he places his action in God's hand and the past and future in the care of His Will and Providence.<sup>4</sup> The power of these phrases over the soul and mind of Muslims depends upon the spiritual presence inherent in the sacred sound of these and other verses of the Sacred Text as well as their meaning. It is

the sound of the Quran which the newly born child first hears as the *Shahādah* is chanted into his or her ears. The Quran is thus the very first sound that welcomes the Muslim to the first stages of his journey in this world. And it is the Quran that is chanted at the moment of death and accompanies the soul in its posthumous journey to the Divine Presence. The chanted Quran is the prototype of all sacred sound. It is the divine music that reminds man of his original abode and at the same time accompanies him in his dangerous journey of return to that abode; for the Quran, although chanted in this world, reverberates through all the cosmic levels to the Divine Presence from which it has issued.

### Presence of the Quran

The language of the Quran is the crystallization of the Divine Word in human language, which seems to be shattered by the "weight" of the revelation from on high.<sup>5</sup> The supreme miracle of Islam is, in fact, considered to be the eloquence (*balāghah*) of the Quran, which is for the Muslim the prototype of language. This eloquence, much debated and discussed by Muslim scholars over the ages,<sup>6</sup> does not reside so much in the ordering of the words into powerful poetic utterance as in the degree of the inspiration as a result of which every sentence, every word, and every letter scintillate with a spiritual presence and are like light congealed in tangible form.

This presence is to be found in the written as well as the sonoral Quran. The art of writing the text of the Quran is the sacred art of Islam *par excellence*. The art of calligraphy, which is so central to Islamic civilization, is inseparable from the Quran; for it was for the purpose of writing the Sacred Text that this art was developed, the earlier styles such as Kufic being nearly completely and solely identified with the writing of the Quran.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the art of illumination, which came into its own and reached its peak of perfection in the Il-khānīd and Mamlūk periods, is the visualization of the spiritual inspiration related to the writing and recitation of the text of the Word of God. To understand the reverence that Muslims show toward the Quran, it is necessary to take cognizance of the spiritual presence in the calligraphy of the words as well as in the sounds that surround and penetrate man when the text is chanted. It is this presence that every faithful Muslim feels instinctively. As a result, he finds comfort and protection even in the physical book itself and carries the Sacred Text with him wherever and whenever possible. The sage finds the same protection in carrying the quintessence of the Quran, which is God's Name, in his heart. According to a *ḥadīth*, "He who protects the Name of God in his heart, God protects him in the world."



The Quran possesses a mysterious presence, which might be called “magical,” in addition to the Book’s being the source of Islamic doctrine, ethics, and sacred history. It is this “magic” that is untranslatable and can only be experienced in the language of the revelation, while the doctrinal content, ethical injunctions, or accounts of the prophets and peoples of old can be rendered into other tongues. This “magic” is inseparable from the spiritual presence of the sonoral revelation, which captures the soul of man as a net cast into the sea in order to return the soul from the domain of multiplicity to Unity.

The Quran is, like the world, at the same time one and multiple. The world is multiplicity which disperses and divides; the Quran is a multiplicity which draws together and draws to Unity. The multiplicity of the holy Book—the diversity of its words, sentences, pictures and stories—fills the soul and thus absorbs it and imperceptibly transposes it into the climate of serenity and immutability by a sort of divine “cunning”. . . . The Quran is like a picture of everything the human brain can think and feel, and it is by this means that God exhausts human disquiet, infusing into the believer silence, serenity and peace.<sup>8</sup>

The Quran is a “world,” but one that leads man to Unity and prevents the soul from being scattered and dispersed.<sup>9</sup>

### The Names of the Quran

The sacred Book of Islam has many names, of which *al-Qur’ān*, meaning “recitation,” is the best known. If this name refers to the essentially auditory and sonoral nature of the Text as that which is read and recited,<sup>10</sup> some of the other well-known names of the Book refer to the fact that it contains all Islamic doctrine and, in fact, the root of all knowledge. The Quran is thus also known as *al-Furqān*, literally, “the discernment,” that is, that which enables man to distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil. The Book is known also as *al-Hudā*, the Guide, since it contains the knowledge that the Muslim must possess in order to remain upon the straight path (*al-Ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) and become aware of God’s Will as it concerns him. Moreover, the Quran is the *Umm al-kitāb*, the Mother of Books, since it is the prototype of all “books,” of all that can be known, the archetype of all things, and since the roots of all knowledge are contained in the eternal Quran.

All the doctrine and all the knowledge in the Quran are summarized in the *Shahādah*, *Lā ilāha illa’Llāh* (“there is no divinity but God”), the supreme metaphysical formula stating the Oneness of the Divine Principle and the reliance of all existence and all qualities upon the One. In a sense,

the whole of the Quran is one long litany with the refrain of *Lā ilāha illa'Allāh* and a commentary upon the truth of Unity (*al-tawhīd*) contained therein. Not only the metaphysical, cosmological, and eschatological doctrines of the Quran but also the ethical precepts that run throughout the Text are so many ways of asserting the Oneness of God, the reliance of all things upon Him, and the way to live according to His Will.

Another name of the Quran is *dhikr Allāh*, the remembrance of God. The Quran is itself the reminder of God's Truth and Presence, and to recite it is to remember God. Not only is the first chapter of the Book, the *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*, the central part of the daily prayers; but also the quintessential prayer of the heart, or *dhikr*, finds its roots in the Quran and may be said to be the essence of its message. The Quran therefore contains both the doctrine and the method of Islamic spirituality, the doctrine being contained in its quintessential form in the *Shahādah* and the method in the invocation of the Name of God or *dhikr*. The Quran, the grand theophany of Islam, is both *Lā ilāha illa'Allāh* and *dhikr Allāh*. It comes from Allah and provides the means and the methods of returning to Him.

### The Quran and Sacred History

The Sacred Book of Islam is replete with episodes of sacred history. It speaks of people and prophets of old, of battles, rebellions, love and death, of God's forgiveness and punishment. But the Quran, and with it Islam, is singularly indifferent to the merely historical significance of this sacred history. The Quran is not a book of history and is even less concerned with history than is the Bible. The sacred history recounted in the Quran is in reality the epic of the life of the soul. The forces of good and evil mentioned in its pages are to be found within ourselves, and even the prophets are the objective and external counterparts and complements of the inner Intellect, which illuminates the heart and mind of man.<sup>11</sup> To recite the pages of the Quran is to become aware of the history of one's own being, the forces of one's own soul, and the conditions of the journey of life at the end of which stand death and Divine Judgment. It is to see the Will of God in shaping man's destiny and man's own role in weaving the substance that constitutes our being once the journey of life terminates and suddenly we find ourselves before the blinding reality of God's Presence.

### The Quran as the Source of Islamic Thought and Law

Not only the supreme doctrine of Unity but all Islamic doctrine originates in the Quran or the *Ḥadīth*, which is the inspired commentary upon it. All

schools of theology and philosophy, all schools of law and political theory, all branches of Islam whether Sunni or Shi'ite base their teachings upon the tenets of the Quran. Whether they agree or differ on the question of determinism and free will, the primacy of faith or action, or the relation of God's Mercy to His Justice, they all derive their teachings from the verses of the Quran, which is like an ocean into which all streams of Islamic thought flow and from which they ultimately originate. There is no claim to Islamicity without a Quranic basis.

Likewise, the practices of Muslims as ordained by the *Sharī'ah* have their origin in the Quran. Although the foundations of the *Sharī'ah* must also be sought in the *Hadīth* and the elaboration of the Law depends, furthermore, upon consensus (*ijmā'*) and analogical reasoning (*qiyās*), in principle all of the *Sharī'ah* is already contained in the Quran. The other sources are only means of elaborating and making explicit what is already contained in the Sacred Text. As for ethical attitudes related to the practice of the Sacred Law, they too are to be found in the Quran, which determines for Muslims all ethical norms and all moral principles. What the Quran teaches constitutes morality, not what human reason determines on the basis of its own judgments.

### The Quran as the Source of the Spiritual Path and Art

The Quran is the source of not only the Law but also the Way or the *Tarīqah*. The spiritual life of Islam as it was to crystallize later in the Sufi orders goes back to the Prophet, who is the source of the spiritual virtues found in the Muslim soul. But the soul of the Prophet was itself illuminated by the Light of God as revealed in the Quran, so that quite justly one must consider the Quranic revelation as the origin of Sufism.<sup>12</sup> It is not accidental that over the ages the Sufis have been the foremost expositors and commentators upon the Quran and that some of the greatest works of Sufism such as the *Mathnawī* of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī are in reality commentaries upon the Sacred Text. Only the Sufis have, in fact, been able to cast aside the veil of this celestial bride, which is the Quran, in order to reveal some of her beauty, which it hides from the eyes of those who are strangers to her.

Even Islamic art, which may be called "the second Revelation" of Islam, is rooted in the Quran, not in its outward form or as a result of applying explicit instructions contained in the Text but in its inner reality.<sup>13</sup> Without the Quran there would have been no Islamic art. The rhythm created in the soul of the Muslim, his predilection for "abstract" expressions of the

truth, the constant awareness of the archetypal world as the source of all earthly forms, and the consciousness of the fragility of the world and the permanence of the Spirit have been brought into being by the Quran in the mind and soul of those men and women who have created the works of Islamic art. Islamic art is the crystallization of the inner reality of the Quran and the imprint of this reality on the soul of the Prophet and, through him, on the soul of Muslims.

The chapters that follow demonstrate clearly the role of the Quran in Islamic spirituality. From the study of this Sacred Book there have come into being numerous sciences, while the souls of men and women have been molded by the repetition of its phrases and the carrying out of its injunctions. Like the original revelation of the Word which filled the totality of space, the Quran has created a whole cosmos within which the Muslim lives and dies. But the Quran is also that net cast by the One to pull men and women lost in the labyrinth of multiplicity back to the Divine Origin. To live in the world of the Quran and according to its injunctions is to be guaranteed a life of spiritual felicity and a death that leads to the abode of peace. In the Islamic universe there is no spirituality possible without the aid of the Book, which teaches man all that he can know or that can be known and which leads man to the goal for which he was created.

### Notes

1. As viewed by Muslims, what is called higher criticism in the West does not at all apply to the text of the Quran. Elaborate sciences concerning conditions in which the verses were revealed (*sha'n al-nuzul*), how the Quran was compiled, how the verses were enumerated, as well as the science and art of the recitation of the Quran, have been developed by Muslim scholars over the centuries. We cannot, however, deal with them here since our goal is to outline the spiritual function and significance of the Quran. But these traditional sciences provide all the answers to questions posed by modern Western orientalists about the structure and text of the Quran, except, of course, those questions that issue from the rejection of the Divine Origin of the Quran and its reduction to a work by the Prophet. Once the revealed nature of the Quran is rejected, then problems arise. But these are problems of orientalists that arise not from scholarship but from a certain theological and philosophical position that is usually hidden under the guise of rationality and objective scholarship. For Muslims, there has never been the need to address these "problems" because Muslims accept the revealed nature of the Quran, in the light of which these problems simply cease to exist.

2. The comparison of the Quran to Christ and the Virgin to the soul of the Prophet is a most profound one that was first studied by F. Schuon and later by W. C. Smith and certain other Western scholars. See Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, trans. P. Townsend (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1984).

3. See E. McClain, *Meditations through the Quran: Tonal Images in an Oral Culture*

(York Beach, ME: Nicolas Hays, 1981); see also S. H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987) chap. 3.

4. On these and other Quranic statements of which the Muslim soul is composed as a mosaic, see Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, trans. D. M. Matheson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979) 66–68.

5. “It is as though the poverty-stricken coagulation which is the language of mortal man were under the formidable pressure of the Heavenly Word broken into a thousand fragments” (Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, 44).

6. See, e.g., al-Baḳillānī’s *I’jāz al-Qur’ān*, studied by G. von Grunebaum, *A Tenth-Century Document of Arabic Literary Theory and Criticism: The Sections on Poetry of al-Baḳillānī’s I’jāz al-Qur’ān* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950).

7. See M. Lings, *The Quranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination* (London: Festival of the World of Islam, 1976); and A. M. Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1984).

8. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, 50.

9. “Just as the world is an immeasurable carpet in which everything is repeated in a rhythm of continual change, or where everything remains similar within the framework of the law of differentiation, so too the Quran—and with it the whole of Islam—is a carpet or fabric, in which the center is everywhere repeated in an infinitely varied way and in which the diversity is no more than a development of the Unity” (Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, 58).

10. The very first verse of the Quran that was revealed begins with the verb *iqra’*, recite! The command concerns the whole of the Book, which is meant to be recited and heard as well as read in the ordinary sense of the term.

11. Certain Sufis have, in fact, identified the prophets mentioned in the Quran with degrees of man’s inner being, speaking of the “Abraham of thy being,” “Moses of thy being,” etc. See H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971–72) vol. 3, chap. 4.

12. This fact, long denied by orientalists, has finally become accepted by a number of well-known Western Islamicists from L. Massignon to A. M. Schimmel. See chapter 12 of this volume, by Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din, “The Nature and Origin of Sufism”; and Mir Valiuddin, *The Quranic Sufism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1959).

13. See T. Burckhardt, *The Art of Islam* (London: Festival of the World of Islam, 1976) 8–9.

# The Spiritual Significance of the Quran

ALLAHBAKHS K. BROHI

## Spirituality and Human Growth

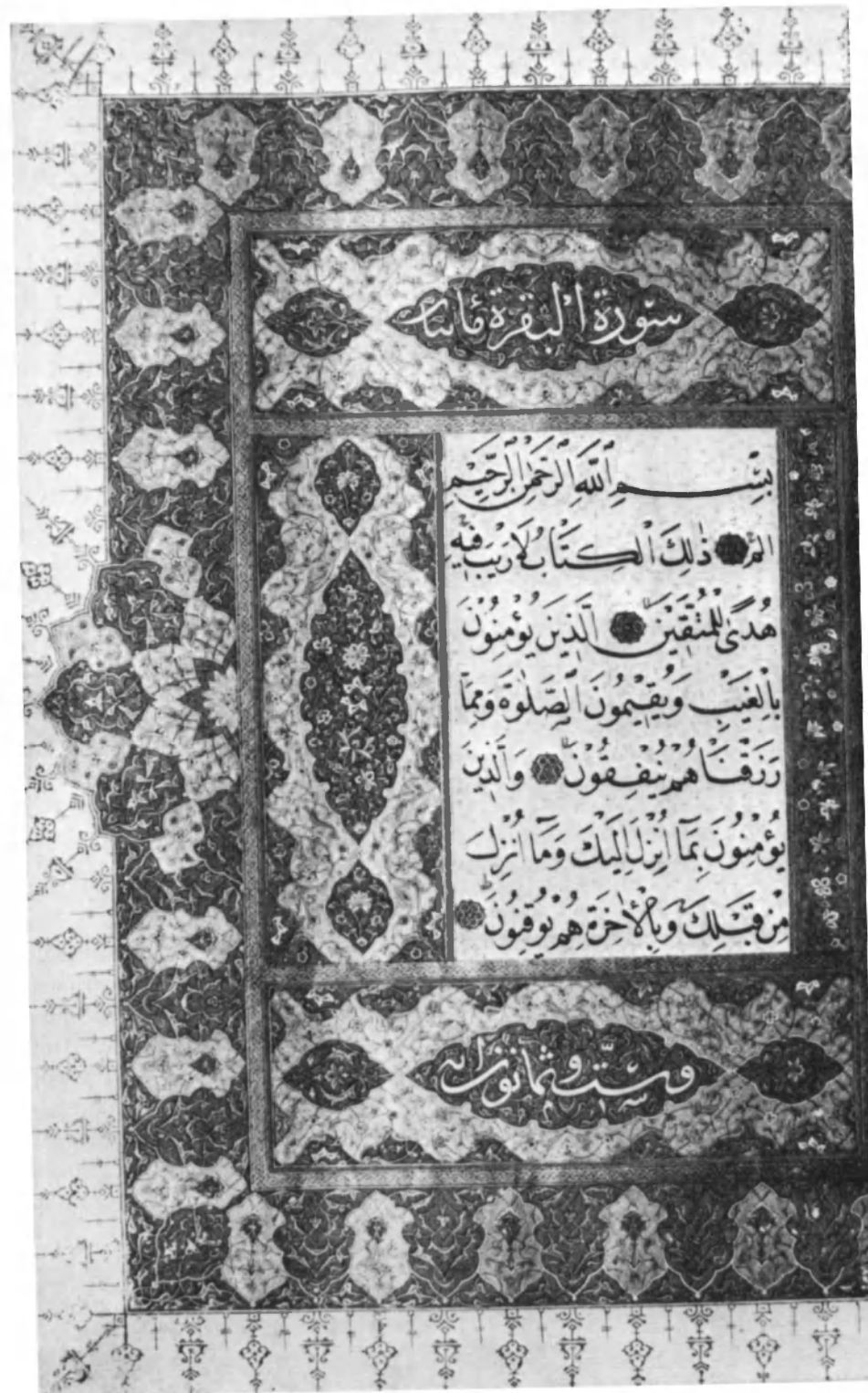
**I**N CONSIDERING THE APPROACH THAT THE QURAN makes to spirituality, one has to be clear about what the term “spirituality” in the context of present discourse implies. Spirituality means many things to many minds and is undeniably a term that is used in varying contexts with different shades of meanings. Many have used this term to designate a special mark of spiritual disposition, and others have employed it to mark off a higher and final development of life itself. In the way the present writer understands it, it will be appropriate to say that anyone who reflects God or the Holy Spirit as the vital, determining norm or principle of his or her life could validly be called “spiritual.” Understood in this sense, the whole of the Quran seems to highlight the importance of the operation of this norm or principle over the life of the believer, if he is going to be saved and admitted to the company of the elect. Negatively, the word “spirituality” is not to be confused with spiritualism, a term that is rather incorrectly used for what is really spiritism, that is, the phenomenon of communicating through media with the departed spirits on the other side of the river of life.

By and large, every religion, including of course Islam, ultimately deals with the supreme issue of what may be called spiritualization of man’s consciousness. The biological base of life in a human being is the same as in any subhuman animal species such as dogs or cats—at least insofar as the primary instincts of preservation of self and preservation of the species to which the animal belongs are concerned. Religion fosters consciousness, which, functionally regarded, aims at inducing the believer to transcend his animal nature, or reach or acquire what—for want of a better expression—

may be called a higher kind of life, a life that is, as the Quran puts it: *khayrun wa abqā*, better and eternal.

In life there is such a thing as biological growth of the individual organism. But this growth is primarily physical in character; that is, it comes to prevail automatically by the unfolding of some latent forces inherent in life. It is basically a kind of growth that consists merely of the addition or accretion of more to the same. A plant grows in this sense when it puts on more leaves, more twigs, or thicker leaves and thicker twigs. It registers a sort of quantitative growth in bulk, and this virtually implies an accretion of the more to the same structure and original content of plant life. There is no transcendence of plant life reflected in such a growth. There is no going beyond the basic matrix of life, which throughout remains the same. This may be likened to a sort of horizontal growth of an organism in the context of the symbolism of the cross, where the vertical coordinate denotes the possibility of a movement upward. The vertical dimension reveals the possibility that the whole horizontal base of the organism is capable of being considered in a new dimension and being led to a new domain. In the case of plant life and using the symbolism of the growth of plants, one could say that it is only when the green plant, which was fed upon filthy manure, bears fruit, a flower, or a blossom that the plant's life grows into a higher dimension.

This growth in the world of the beyond, or in a higher direction, is capable of being achieved at the human level by a conscious effort to make certain choices that are available to man. These choices within the matrix of a religious consciousness enable its votaries to opt for the higher or uphill or difficult path. The making of these choices takes life on its upward path to God. The answer to the questions of how and why these choices have to be made is found at the heart of religion. No wonder then that the Quran calls itself by yet another but a well-known name, *al-Furqān* (literally, "the discernment"), for the good reason that here the revelation is geared to the master purpose of showing the difference between good and evil, so that correct choices can be made. It also deals with the morphology of awareness in terms of which these choices have to be made. For every choice there is an appropriate occasion, as for any period or epoch or phase of life there is an appropriate destiny, which is described traditionally as *li-kulli ajalīn kitāb* (all that is decreed is written). If these choices are not made at the appropriate time as commanded under the mandate of heaven, man will be placed in the serious difficulty of having to put forward a greater effort to negotiate the course of his future development—to say nothing of the suffering that would be involved in the threatened consequences stemming from false choices. The Quran deals at great length with this aspect



1. Illuminated frontispiece of the Quran, Y.Y. 913 f.4a, 1491.



of human action and emphasizes that when lapses occur the Mercy of God, Who is forgiver of sins and Whose grace knows no limit, takes notice of man's repentance and forgives his sins. Indeed, God's Mercy surrounds everything, man included, and yet man is called upon to perform his part of begging for forgiveness, which literally means doing *tawbah*. This repentance or *tawbah* consists in striving to return to the point where the deviation took place when the false choice was made and restarting the labor of recovering the path that is straight—the path that in fact the Quran calls “the straight path” (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*).

The Quran refers characteristically to two paths that are available to man to choose from and stresses the desirability of choosing the higher, the more difficult path. In the words of the Quran:

Thinketh he that none hath power over him?  
 And he saith: I have destroyed vast wealth:  
 Thinketh he that none beholdeth him?  
 Did We not assign unto him two eyes  
 And a tongue and two lips,  
 And guide him to the parting of the mountain ways?  
 But he hath not attempted the Ascent—  
 Ah, what will convey unto thee what the Ascent is!—  
 (It is) to free a slave,  
 And to feed in the day of hunger  
 An orphan near of kin,  
 Or some poor wretch in misery,  
 And to be of those who believe and exhort one another to  
 perseverance and exhort one another to pity. (XC, 5–17)

### The Human Predicament

The Quran has set forth the predicament of man resulting from his fall from grace, which is allegorically represented in his having been ejected from the paradisaal state in consequence of his disobedience to the Divine Command not to approach “this Tree.” In the words of the Quran, “And We said: Adam dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden and eat thereof easefully where you desire; but draw not nigh this Tree lest you be evil-doers” (II, 35). The unending conflict engendered by the disobedience of Satan in not bowing before Adam and his malicious resolve to mislead man by making evil appear as good to man has been stated in the Quran at several places. For instance, the Quran states:

And when We said to the angels, “Bow yourselves to Adam”; so they bowed themselves, save Iblis; he said, “Shall I bow myself unto one Thou hast created of clay?”

He said, "What thinkest Thou? This whom Thou hast honoured above me—if Thou deferrest me to the Day of Resurrection I shall assuredly master his seed, save a few."

Said He, "Depart! Those of them that follow thee—surely Gehenna shall be your recompense, an ample recompense!"

And startle whomsoever of them thou canst with thy voice; and rally against them thy horsemen and thy foot, and share with them in their wealth and their children, and promise them!" But Satan promises them naught, except delusion.

"Surely over My servants thou shalt have no authority." Thy Lord suffices as a guardian. (XVII, 61–65)

In this contest between man and Satan, who is his avowed enemy, the man who is righteous is not alone. It is clear from the verses quoted above that, although God has permitted Satan to carry out his attempt to mislead man, it is He who in the last resort has supreme power over Satan to help man. He has sent prophets to man who have brought guidance to him. Thus, in effect, only those who neglect God's guidance come within the reach and grip of Satanic influence. But those who live in full consciousness of God's supreme Presence and His ubiquitous law are protected against Satanic designs and machinations. The righteous are supported and, indeed, it is said in the Quran that the earth is inherited by the righteous. The evil, of course, is backed by a "slinking prompter," but then he can be defeated by seeking refuge with the Lord. Satan has been described as the avowed enemy of man, and the prophets have been called warners and guides because their historical function has been to warn man against serious consequences of his disobedience to God's commands. They have attempted to guide man, despite the designs of Satan, to make correct choices in order to be able to fulfill the Law and to be able to earn the reward of higher life.

From what has been said so far, it is clear that man is here to submit at the altar of the Higher Presence, and the very Law by which his own development takes place is precisely in accord with the Divine Nature. It is in this very perspective that he is called by the Quran to seek his salvation:

So set thy face to the religion, a man of pure faith—God's original upon which He originated mankind. There is no changing God's creation. That is the right religion; but most men know it not. (XXX, 30)

All spiritual development for man signifies his effort to grow in the mold in which by his own nature he has been invited to grow. There are other verses to show the way nature bows before God:

Have they not regarded all things that God has created casting their shadows to the right and to the left, bowing themselves before God in all lowliness?

To God bows everything in the heavens, and every creature crawling on the earth, and the angels. They have not waxed proud; they fear their Lord above them, and they do what they are commanded. (XVI, 48-50)

### The Love of God

Man too is here to serve his Lord. There are many pathways that the traditional religious teaching of mankind appears to recommend for securing its true growth or self-realization and for attaining to higher levels of spiritual attainment. Among these paths, the love of God would appear to be highlighted by the universal religious tradition of mankind as the best means for spiritual realization and self-development.

One of the Names of God mentioned in the Quran is *al-Wadūd*, that is, one who loves:

And ask forgiveness of your Lord, then turn to him. Surely your Lord is merciful, loving and kind. (XI, 90)

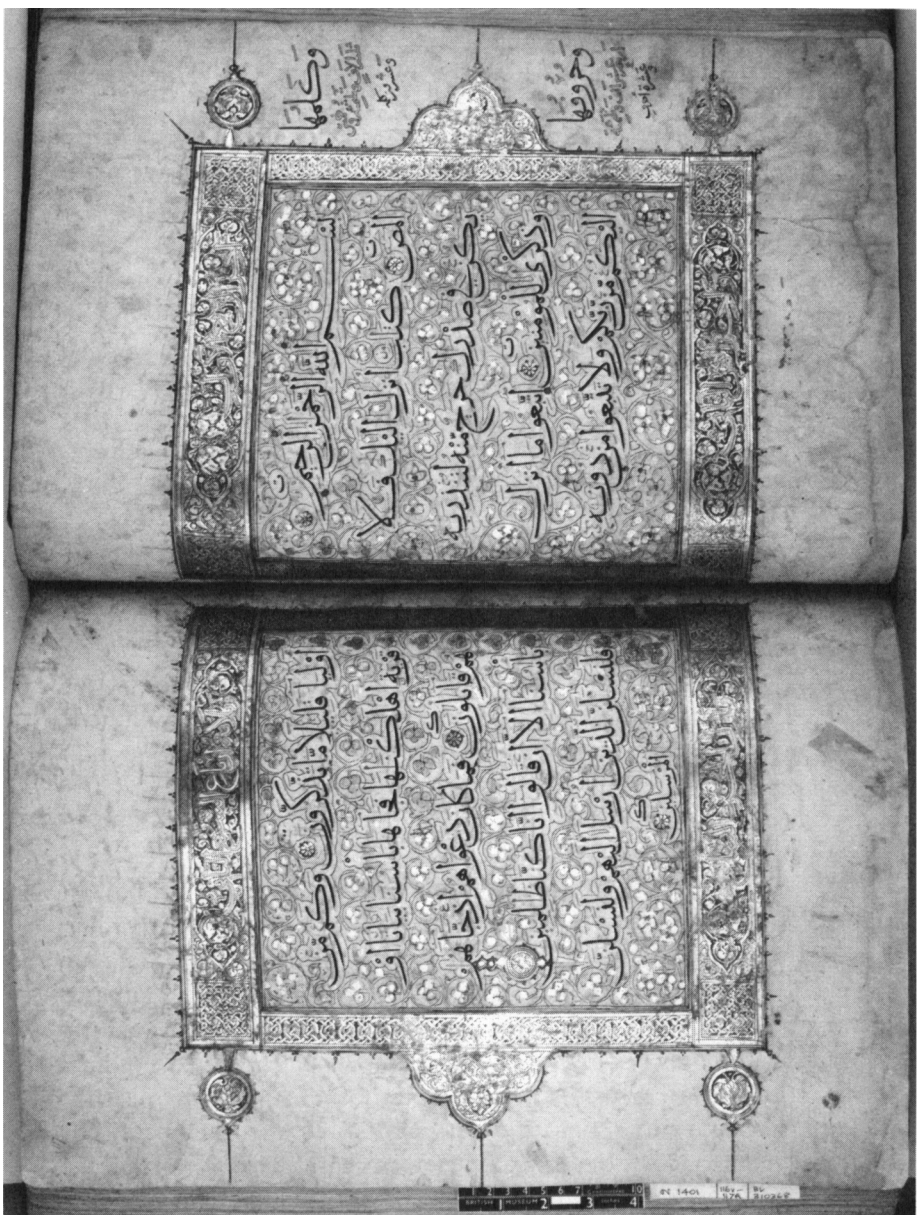
Similarly the Quran stresses the same fact:

Surely He it is Who creates first and reproduces. And He is the forgiving and loving. (LXXXV, 13-14)

Or in another place:

Every one of them shall come to Him upon the Day of Resurrection, all alone. Surely, those who believe and do good deeds of Righteousness—unto them the All-Merciful shall assign love. (XIX, 96)

The Quranic view of God is that He is indescribable and that there is nothing like unto Him and, furthermore, that no matter what one says about Him, He is completely beyond it. Therefore, it is difficult at first to understand how one could love that which one has not seen and cannot imagine. For all love presupposes the vision or sight of the beloved and the attraction that is cast by his presence upon human sensibility. It would appear that the Quranic view about steps to be taken to show one's love for God is, in the first instance, to obey unconditionally what the Prophet says, not only because obedience to the Prophet is obedience to God but essentially because, to use the words of the Quran (where the Prophet is made to say), "If you love God, then obey me, then God will *love you* and forgive your sins" (III, 31). There are, in several verses in the Quran, references to God loving those who do good to others (II, 195; III, 133, 147). Furthermore, God loves those who are patient (III, 145) and the *muttaqīn*, that is, those who control themselves and do not allow false inducement to abjure the path prescribed by God for them to follow (III, 55; IX, 4). God



2. The Opening of Sura VII of the Quran, Arabic ms OR. 1401, ff. 116v-117r, 14th century, Egyptian.

also loves those who trust in Him (III, 158) and those who are just (V, 42). All these references show that in the last prophetic dispensation love is pre-eminently reflected by deed, which takes the form of obedience to the Lord as this may be exhibited by the quality of higher virtue. It is to be noticed that love is not here treated as merely a function of the act of making a declaration of love. The test of the love of God is obedience to the Prophet and obedience to what is prescribed in the Divine Word. Islam, therefore, consists essentially in conscious submission to the Law of God and that which is commanded by His Prophet. There is also emphasis in the Quran on *dhikr Allāh* (the remembrance of God), saying prayers, and countenancing other such modes of activity in which man, by participating in the Divine Presence, cultivates within himself a disposition to render service for God. After all, the Jinn and mankind, as the Quran says, have been created only to serve Him.

### To Please God

The whole purpose of these teachings in the Quran is to educate men concerning how to please God. For it is by pleasing Him that one secures within oneself a state of being at rest. It is in that state (*al-nafs al-muṭma'innah*) that man returns to the Lord well pleased and well pleasing:

No indeed! When the earth is ground to powder, and thy Lord comes, and the angels rank on rank, and Gehenna is brought out, upon that day man will remember; and how shall the Reminder be for him?

He shall say, "O would that I had forwarded for my life!" Upon that day none shall chastise as He chastises, none shall bind as He binds. "O soul at peace, return unto thy Lord, well-pleased, well-pleasing! Enter thou among My servants! Enter thou My Paradise!" (LXXXIX, 20-28)

What man does in this life is therefore reaped by him in what the Quran calls the *ākhirah*, that is, in the phase of life that is to come or the hereafter. And according to the Quran, it is life in the hereafter that is real life, but it is a reality that can also be experienced in this life. The whole of the Quran is full of admonitions to the believers to treat this life seriously, for they will all be questioned and their accounts will be audited rigorously but impartially. This world has not been created in vain. There is a serious purpose for which this universe and men have been created. If men are to give a worthwhile account of the way in which they have spent their lives, they must allow the commandments of God to become the decisive norms for regulating their conduct, and they must accept the values that have been stressed in the Quran as the decisive norms for determining the great divide between good and evil. It is this life which, according to the Quran, is